

The Grave Consequence

WASHINGTON

The long night of repression is falling on Vilnius. American diplomats have been ejected and Western newsmen are being packed on trains to Moscow. Any impressions, arrests and beatings will take place in the dark.

If Mikhail Gorbachev is determined to use his new power to teach the freedom-seeking Lithuanians the meaning of obedience to central authority, the rest of the world cannot stop him. But we can make known the consequences of crackdown, and to the extent his power at home is dependent on his reputation abroad, we might deter his action.

As if in slow motion, we are playing out one of the great moral moments in modern history. Few of us remember Haile Selassie pleading Ethiopia's case against Mussolini's aggression, or the betrayed expression on Czech faces at Munich, or the impulsive face of Andrei Gromyko as his lies about Cuban missiles were exploded by pictures at the U.N.

We are not at the brink of war; we are at the moment of decision about right and wrong done among nations. How we conduct ourselves under such pressure will be measured by historians to define our integrity as individuals and our values as nations.

No moral choice is black and white; in arguing now what is the right course for the U.S., let's first do away with strawmen of wimps and warmongers. It is not the coldly pragmatic geopoliticians who want to sell out the Lithuanian patriots versus the hotly idealistic jingoes who want to dispatch ambassadors and encourage violence.

George Bush and those around him who choose to put the salvation of Mr. Gorbachev ahead of the immediate

freedom of the Baltic peoples are not to be scorned as born appeasers.

These well-intentioned leaders have concluded that the long-range best interests of the U.S. and of disarmament lie with the continuation of the Gorbachev regime — and that as it gains strength he will ultimately free the captive nations. We must not challenge his pride, goes this argument, because it might cause his downfall and the emergence of the old crowd.

Those of us on both right and left who want to put Mr. Gorbachev to the test on this issue of independence for the

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or forever lose
your peace.

nations seized by Stalin and Hitler are not eager for a return of the era of superpower confrontation.

We who criticize the puissance of Mr. Bush's objection to a crackdown have concluded that when the long-run good is used to justify the short-run bad, the long-run good never comes to be; worse, taking a neutral position between freedom and tyranny corrupts our own values. We argue that Mr. Gorbachev has never been too proud to respond to pressure, and that our pressure for Baltic independence should be unrelenting.

That describes a couple of fairly different Weltanschauung; it applies to our reaction to repression in China as well. Assuming good faith and similar goals in both world views, what can we

agree that Americans should be doing at such a critical moment?

First, we should prevail on our President to stop sending inconsistent signals, one day having a spokesman wag a finger, the next sending a letter to Moscow pretending both sides bear equal responsibility for violence.

For 50 years, we have stood for Baltic independence; now that it looms, Mr. Bush should state publicly that we do not waver, that we will never "understand" a war on a nonviolent movement, and that the rumble of tanks through Vilnius is a provocation to violence and a threat to international peace.

Second, Congress should drop its two-facedness. With one face, Congressional leaders get briefed on secret diplomacy and come out to say the President knows best; with another, Senator Ted Kennedy is dispatched to Moscow and makes fools of us all: he announces that Mr. Gorbachev promises no use of force "unless to suppress violence," a new qualification on the previous no-force pledge that Lithuanians properly saw as fresh intimidation.

Third, our diplomats should not be so easily hornswoggled. Pressing for a referendum de-legitimizes the acts of a Lithuanian government that needs support of its legitimacy, and drives a wedge between Baltic states: Latvia has been heavily Russified and could thus be occupied out of independence.

Finally, let's hear from the other voices of conscience. Maggie Thatcher is with Neville Chamberlain on this, and Helmut Kohl is expectedly silent, but where is Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel? What happened to the Pope? And why do the world media react so meekly to being shut out of the end of glasnost? □